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Source, Authority, and Audience in the BBC's *Merlin*

JON SHERMAN

Although *Merlin*'s producers claim to target a young audience, much of the program's appeal is found in intertextual references to and deviations from medieval Arthurian literature. The dynamic tension created between continuity and innovation can only be appreciated by those with some—or even significant—knowledge of *Merlin*'s medieval antecedents. (JS)

In James Noble's discussion of the commercialization of the Arthurian legend in the town of Tintagel, he describes *The Great Hall of Chivalry* as appealing to the uninitiated and 'to those already acquainted with the Arthurian story.'[1] Noble notes that a sign on one side of *The Great Hall* addresses tourists already familiar with Arthurian lore, while the corresponding sign on the opposite entrance 'advertises a multi-media retelling of the Arthurian story,'[2] that is, providing background information for those with less knowledge of King Arthur and his knights. While the town of Tintagel appears to have appealed successfully to the initiated and the uninitiated, and is able 'to accommodate a wide variety of tastes and interests,'[3] this negotiation of audience has proven more difficult for small screen adaptations of the Arthurian legend. Like Tintagel, the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC) series *Merlin* has attempted to appeal to both an older viewing demographic already familiar with the legends of King Arthur and to a younger audience uninitiated in this tradition. The result is a series rich with medieval allusions and intertextual references, but one also plagued by puerile slapstick, which, unlike *The Great Hall of Chivalry* in Tintagel, cannot be reconciled with two opposing signs.

BBC One's *Merlin* was introduced in 2008, and after five seasons the final episode aired in December 2012. The pilot, entitled 'The Dragon's Call,' revealed the series' central tenets to its audience. The opening credits proclaim, 'In a land of myth and a time of magic, the destiny of a great kingdom rests on the shoulders of a young boy. His name: Merlin.'[4] This voice-over, coupled with the episode's title 'The Dragon's Call,' immediately absolves the series from the need for historical accuracy. *Merlin* is set in a mythic land inhabited by dragons, and it makes no attempt at recreating fifth- or sixth-century Britain. The Albion portrayed in *Merlin* is not one of history, but is an 'imaginary referent, a vague idea which we hold about the

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past.'[5] The idea of a generically medieval setting is one common to many modern Arthurian adaptations. Indeed, Norris J. Lacy points out this trend regarding documentaries about King Arthur, and claims that 'an attempt is made to merely offer a film that will look somewhat "medieval" to an audience,' meaning that even documentaries, a more 'factual' genre than fantasy series, make little attempt at historical veracity.[6] And like the prologue to a medieval romance, which provides the audience with 'the narratorial "stance" of a given poet,'[7] the opening credits and first scenes of *Merlin* explain the series' premises to its viewers and free the writers from the constraints of historical accuracy. When the series' two main characters—Merlin and Prince Arthur—are introduced and viewers realize they are actually the same age, the series also emancipates itself from the need to adhere to the medieval canon of Arthurian literature. While stories of Arthur's youth abound in literature, film, television and other media, as do tales of a young Merlin, the medieval and modern legends of King Arthur are devoid of instances where the two grow up together, making the BBC's adaptation of the legend unique.

Although the first episode of *Merlin* demonstrates the writers' attempt to create something new, the adventures of the young prince and boy wizard are not divorced from the tradition which inspired them. In fact, much of *Merlin*'s appeal to its audience is found in its masterful manipulation of viewers' expectations, based on their knowledge of the Arthurian legend derived from sources including Geoffrey of Monmouth and Chrétien de Troyes, but also more modern authors like T.H. White and Marion Zimmer Bradley. Although we are frequently reminded that there are no absolutes in the legends of King Arthur—no single text which supersedes all others or which solely defines the genre—readers and viewers have come to have certain expectations regarding Camelot and its inhabitants. From any given adaptation, an audience expects a Round Table; a sword in a stone; a wise, old wizard; deception and betrayal at the hands of Mordred, Morgana and Morgause; and a scandalous love triangle, among other stock elements. Well aware of these expectations, the BBC series begins by freeing itself from these constraints, only to spend five seasons playfully addressing them.

Merlin's approach to its medieval sources and the tradition to which it is indebted is perhaps best understood first through a brief examination of the medieval view of source materials and then through a comparison with three modern analogues to the series. The medieval tradition reveals a curious blend of esteem for sources and yet utter disregard for loyalty thereto. Both ideas can be found in *Merlin*'s nod to Geoffrey of Monmouth in a number of episodes, but also in their complete departure from his and others' storylines in which, for example, Merlin aids in Uther's seduction of Igerne, which leads to Arthur's conception. Comparison with three modern series—two similar to *Merlin* in content and one created by the BBC with a similar approach to

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its source material—demonstrates that while *Merlin* attempts to appeal to a wide viewership, which includes children, the series assumes a certain amount of background knowledge from its audience, often absent in younger viewers. This is not to say that adult viewers are always what Noble calls 'those already acquainted with the Arthurian story,'[8] nor does it suppose homogeneity among the so-called 'initiated,' since adult viewers will have widely varying degrees of familiarity with the legends of King Arthur. Similarly, the younger audience is not necessarily unaware of the medieval legends, but for simplicity's sake the bifurcation younger/older or initiated/uninitiated essentially corresponds to viewers' potential knowledge of the medieval Arthurian tradition.

Merlin's approach to its sources and the tradition out of which it arises is not unlike that of its medieval antecedents. Authors in the Middle Ages borrowed liberally from classical and contemporary sources, at times acknowledging a source and at other times giving no indication of their conscription of others' creative work. And just as authors were prone to change their materials, scribes also changed, added and omitted as they saw fit. But while medieval authors and scribes—like modern film and television producers—took a somewhat loose approach to their sources, they still coveted the authority lent to their narratives by having a source and being embedded in a tradition. Writers in the Middle Ages employed a number of strategies to provide their works the authority and cultural legitimation they desired, while still granting them the freedom to create their own unique narratives. These strategies included directly or indirectly referencing their authors' education and social standing to lend credibility to their writing.[9] They also referenced 'other respected texts,' including the Bible, classical sources and the works of their contemporaries to draw parallels between their narratives and those that came before them.[10] So-called 'translations' often included a source reference to lend a narrative credibility. It is, however, important to note that the veracity of the cited source is usually unimportant and that there is no assumption that the authors will adhere to the source or sources they mention.[11] Especially for Arthurian romances, the inclusion of familiar names, places, objects and motifs frequently served to underscore a text's authority. And finally, medieval authors often appealed to their audience, 'its social institutions and common cultural practices,' to ingratiate themselves with their reading—or listening—public.[12]

Geoffrey of Monmouth, for example, lends veracity to his *History of the Kings of Britain* by mentioning his actual sources—Gildas and Bede—as well as 'quedam Britannici sermonis librum vetustissimum' [a certain very ancient book written in the British language].[13] As mentioned above, however, it is the idea of a source that is important, not its actual existence and, as Richard Loomis has said about that very ancient book, '[n]o such consecutive account of the kings of Britain in the British language (that is, Welsh or Breton) has

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ever come to light.'[14] Similarly, Edwin Pace refers to Geoffrey's 'very ancient book' as 'a cunning fiction' and adds that the *History* is 'a clever literary deception.'[15] Chrétien de Troyes comments on earlier versions of the Erec story that 'mutilate and spoil' the narrative, using a reference to previous versions to set his *Erec et Enide* apart from those of his predecessors.[16] Wolfram von Eschenbach claims that Chrétien de Troyes was not his source—although he was—and that a master Kyot was—although he was not.[17] Again, it is the indication of a source which is important, not its actual existence. And much like Geoffrey's fabricated 'very ancient book,' the author of *Daniel von dem Blühenden Tal* states that a certain Albrich of Bisenze—the actual source for the medieval German *Alexanderlied*—provided him with his material, although this is a clear fabrication.[18]

Thus, we see that the Arthurian legend has long been open to change, addition, and deviation. Once a source was named, medieval authors felt little obligation to adhere to the texts they invoked. Writers revised and reimagined existing narratives or borrowed knights' names from contemporary romances to create entirely new stories. And modern incarnations of Arthurian narratives have been no less free with their source materials. Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is less a retelling of the medieval legend and more a critique of nineteenth-century society. Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* reimagines the Arthurian legends from the perspective of the narrative's women. In Antoine Fuqua's *King Arthur*, the Once and Future King is caught between two worlds as he is part Roman and part Briton. And in the BBC's *Merlin*, Guinevere is a serving girl and the role of cryptic advisor falls to a dragon. Once embedded in the tradition, authors—medieval and modern—felt free to change and update these narratives, and it is perhaps this mutability that makes the legend of King Arthur as productive in the twenty-first century as it was in the twelfth and thirteenth.

Although a number of essays in this special issue compare the BBC's *Merlin* to its more contemporary analogue, Starz's *Camelot*, the program is perhaps best understood when viewed in light of two television series which also explore the youth of Camelot's renowned wizard. The first is a British production originally aired on April 23, 1979,[19] called *The Boy Merlin*.[20] The series consisted of only one season with six episodes, seven including the pilot. *The Boy Merlin*'s target audience is clearly young children who are less familiar with the Legends of King Arthur, and the story follows Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain* relatively faithfully. In the first episode, viewers learn that Merlin's mother is the Princess Ismena, who lives in a cloister, and that although Merlin's father is unknown, many suspect that he was an incubus or the Devil, a sentiment which the knight Iefan reiterates in the second episode: 'And I know what people say about his real father, too. He wasn't a man at all, but a demon of the night' (I.2). As in Geoffrey

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of Monmouth, Vortigern is king of Britain and has invited the Saxons into his lands. It has been prophesied that two kings (Uther and Arthur) will come who will 'sweep out the Saxons like chaff before the wind and Merlin shall serve them all' (I.1). Another nod to the medieval tradition is found in Merlin's real name: Ambrosius. The series' pilot describes Merlin's childhood, addresses the question of his father and then introduces the story of Vortigern's tower. In the second episode, entitled 'Red Dragon, White Dragon,' the audience is informed that Vortigern believes he must sacrifice a boy who is the fatherless child of a princess—just as in Geoffrey's *History*. Merlin is brought before Vortigern and informs him that 'there's a cave in the rock under the foundations and in it's a pool of water' (I.2) with a red and a white dragon. When a red and a white dragon statue are found in a pool of water under the tower, Merlin's prophecy and his powers are confirmed and he is asked to interpret the statues' meaning. The young sorcerer's pronouncements in *The Boy Merlin* are taken almost word for word from Geoffrey of Monmouth, demonstrating the writers' awareness of and engagement with the medieval source. In *The History of the Kings of Britain* Merlin claims that 'Rubeus vero gentem designat Britanniae, quae ab albo opprimetur. Montes itaque eius ut valles aequabuntur et flumina vallium sanguine manabunt...Praevalebit tandem oppressa et saevitiae exterorum resistet' [the red dragon represents the people of Britain, who will be overrun by the white one: for Britain's mountains and valleys shall be levelled, and the streams in its valleys shall run with blood...the race that is oppressed shall prevail in the end, for it will resist the savagery of the invaders].[21] In the British series the young wizard makes a very similar, albeit truncated pronouncement: 'The valleys and mountains of Britain shall run with blood. But the race that is oppressed shall prevail in the end' (I.2). The episode ends with Merlin predicting the arrival of a king who will drive out the Saxons and restore the land to its former glory. Like T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, *The Boy Merlin* is an adaptation of the Arthurian Legends for a young audience uninitiated in the tradition, and although there is, as always, some slight deviation, the series is essentially a faithful retelling of Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Like *The Boy Merlin*, the German series *Merlin* was created for a young audience mostly unfamiliar with the Arthurian tradition. The show first aired in Germany in 1980[22] and consisted of only one season with thirteen episodes. The series' pilot begins with a voice-over:

> Im fünften Jahrhundert nach Christi Geburt, lebte in damals in viele kleine Reiche zerissene Britanien am Hof eines unbedeutenden Königs ein kleiner Junge mit Namen Merlin. Ihm war geweißsagt worden, dass er einmal der größte Magier und Zauberer seiner Zeit werden würde, falls er am Leben bliebe (I.1).[23]

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> [In the fifth century after the birth of Christ, there lived in Britain—at that time divided into countless small kingdoms—at the court of an unimportant king, a small boy with the name Merlin. Prophecy said that he would one day become the greatest magician and wizard of his time, if he lived that long.]

The inclusion of a specific historical time period and the description of Britain divided into countless tiny kingdoms make it clear that the series' writers do not expect their audience to be familiar with these details. Perhaps even the use of the words 'Magier und Zauberer' [magician and wizard]—an unnecessary repetition—indicates an explanation of the word *Magier*, which is less common in German than *Zauberer*, to a younger viewership.

As in *The Boy Merlin*, the first episode introduces the core elements of the Merlin legend to an audience who has not read Geoffrey of Monmouth, Thomas Malory or T.H. White. In the very first scene a boy repeatedly calls Merlin a 'bastard,' and the issue of Merlin's father is then addressed in greater detail later in the episode. When Merlin finally asks about his father, he is told 'vor deinem Vater muss du dich fürchten, Merlin…Er ist unter uns und in dir. In deinem Herzen, Merlin, ist das Böse und das Gute' [you should fear your father, Merlin…He is amongst us and in you. In your heart, Merlin, resides both evil and good] (I.1). Merlin's mentor and father figure is a man named Blaise—a name familiar from the medieval French tradition—who is also the king's doctor and alchemist. Unlike the BBC's *Merlin*, with its allusions and obscuring references, the German series introduces elements found in the medieval tradition and then thoroughly explains them to its uninitiated audience. For example, the first episodes focus on the conflict between the Britons and the Saxons, which is explained in detail. The current king hates all things Roman and has invited the Saxons into his lands to aid in driving the Romans out. Merlin overhears the king's oldest son complaining about the Saxon invaders, and this theme is then developed over the course of the series. Similarly, detailed narrative exposition is devoted to the conflict between Christianity and Paganism, another central theme in the series. Both the German *Merlin* and the British *The Boy Merlin* retell medieval narratives without the expectation that their audiences are already familiar with that tradition.

While *The Boy Merlin* and *Merlin* can be productively compared to the BBC series, it is—perhaps surprisingly—the series *Sherlock* that has more similarities with *Merlin* (at least in its approach to the tradition which inspired it) than the more obvious analogues mentioned above. Unlike the medieval Arthurian tradition, which offers a plurality of defining sources, Sherlock Holmes has one clear and authoritative source in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's narratives. This, however, has not prevented the quintessential sleuth from becoming the inspiration for countless adaptations and new interpretations, making Sherlock Holmes almost as productive in the modern imagination

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as King Arthur. Like the BBC's *Merlin*, *Sherlock* relies on assumed audience knowledge for much of its humor and entertainment value. A viewer entirely unfamiliar with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's stories may still enjoy the series, but at least part of its charm will be lost on the uninitiated. The intertextual references to the tales of Sherlock Holmes—and more generally to popular culture—serve, as Walter Haug put it, as an 'augenzwinkerdnes Spiel mit dem Publikum' [wink at the audience].[24] The series' writers use these intertextual references to create a dynamic tension between continuity and innovation that enthralls audiences eager to see what was borrowed from Doyle's stories and what is completely changed. This serves both to embed the series in the Sherlock Holmes tradition, and at the same time—especially with *Sherlock*'s modern setting—free it from the constraints of that tradition.

Sherlock, of course, is based on Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's works, so a lengthy enumeration of the sources for individual episodes, scenes, characters and events would be too extensive to include here and has been undertaken elsewhere.[25] What has enchanted the BBC audience (at least those familiar with the Sherlock Holmes stories) are the subtle changes the series makes—based on Doyle's work, but in some way adapted or updated. The title of the pilot episode, for example, is 'A Study in Pink,' and the episode which introduces Irene Adler is called 'A Scandal in Belgravia', slight variations on Doyle's titles, *A Study in Scarlet* and 'A Scandal in Bohemia,' respectively. The initiated audience will also find the BBC's Holmes and Watson cases—recorded in Dr. Watson's blog—to contain playful updates of Doyle's stories, like 'The Geek Interpreter' ('The Greek Interpreter') and 'The Speckled Blond' ('The Speckled Band'). A similar use of the source with slight modification can be seen in the changes made to Doyle's 'A Scandal in Bohemia,' which opens and closes with the comment that, for Sherlock Holmes, Irene Adler would always be 'the woman.'[26] In the BBC series, Ms. Adler is recast as a dominatrix whose professional name is 'The Woman,' borrowing from Doyle while at the same time giving his moniker entirely new meaning.

More subtle updates and references in the BBC's *Sherlock*, which only an audience intimately familiar with Doyle's works would notice, are also omnipresent in the series. In 'The Sign of Four' Holmes explains his process of deduction to Watson using the example of the doctor's pocket watch, and an almost identical episode occurs in the BBC series pilot, except the watch is now a cell phone. Perhaps more subtle and playful is the BBC's revision of the significance of the letters on the wall in 'A Study in Pink.' In Doyle's *A Study in Scarlet*, the killer writes the German word *Rache* on the wall at the murder scene in an attempt to mislead the police and throw suspicion on foreign or communist workers' movements. In the BBC adaptation, the inspectors find the letters 'R-a-c-h-e' on the wall and assume that the victim, in her final moments, wrote the German word for revenge, to which

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Holmes sarcastically responds 'yes, as she was dying she scribbled "revenge" in German.'[27] In *Sherlock* the victim was actually writing the name of her daughter, Rachel. Even the introduction of Mycroft Holmes in the BBC series plays with audience expectations and knowledge of Doyle's stories. Watson's 'kidnapper'—called by Holmes 'his Nemesis'—turns out to be Sherlock Holmes' brother, but the suspense and mystery surrounding the scene (mis)lead the viewer familiar with the Holmes narrative to expect Professor Moriarty (I.1). Although not an intertextual reference to Doyle's work, even the casting of Russell Tovey—the werewolf in *Being Human*—as Henry Knight in 'The Hounds of Baskerville' serves the function of 'winking' at an in-the-know viewership and referencing, as Peter Kern mentioned, the social institutions and culture of its audience.[28]

Perhaps the most subtle interaction with the viewing audience and their expectations that the BBC's *Sherlock* offers is found in the recurring jokes about the sexuality of the series' two protagonists. Each episode 'contains some reference to the homoerotic possibilities of the Holmes/Watson bond'[29] and Dr. Watson is forced, repeatedly, to inform people that he is, in fact, not gay. Carlen Lavigne views these jokes as an acknowledgement of the series' homoerotic subtext, which then fails, in the end, to deliver a new or updated version of Doyle's characters.[30] What Lavigne overlooks, however, is that the source of these jokes is to be found in the interaction between the modern reader/viewer and the source material. While there is no reason to believe that Doyle intended a homoerotic subtext in the interaction between John Watson and Sherlock Holmes, a modern reader is tempted to view their interactions differently than a nineteenth-century reader. Whether it is young Stamford calling Holmes 'queer'[31] in the first Sherlock Holmes novel *A Study in Scarlet* or the domestic bliss the two create in their Baker Street abode, a twenty-first-century reader cannot overlook the obvious parallels between Holmes and Watson's cohabitation and that of a happy couple. Indeed, modern readers are perhaps tempted to view Watson's comment about living with Sherlock Holmes in an entirely different light than their nineteenth-century counterparts. When Stamford mentions that Holmes is looking for a roommate, the doctor replies 'if he really wants someone to share the rooms and the expense, I am the very man for him. I should prefer having a partner to being alone.'[32]

Additionally, after the two are introduced, Holmes comments that 'It's just as well for two fellows to know the worst of one another before they begin to live together.'[33] Subsequent Sherlock Holmes stories contain similar comments and phrases, which Doyle hardly intended to imply anything other than a platonic relationship between the good doctor and the sleuth, but modern readers cannot help but add new significance to these comments. Holmes' concern in *The Sign of Four* for Watson's wellbeing sounds almost

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spousal: 'Look here Watson; you look regularly done. Lie down there on the sofa and see if I can put you to sleep.'[34] A similar sentiment can be found in Holmes' comment about his skills as a homemaker: 'Watson, you have never yet recognized my merits as a housekeeper.'[35] The BBC series does not alter the sexuality of Doyle's characters, but playfully addresses a suspicion that modern readers bring to the nineteenth-century texts. *Sherlock* expects its audience to be familiar enough with Doyle's narratives to recognize scenes taken directly from the Sherlock Holmes stories and those which draw on but change Doyle's texts, and the writers even play with the cultural associations the modern reader brings to 100-year-old narratives.

The BBC's *Merlin* takes a similar approach to the tradition which inspired it and—at its best—expects its viewers to be intimately familiar with the Arthurian legends. Like *The Boy Merlin* and the German series *Merlin*, the pilot episode of *Merlin* informs the viewing audience what to expect from the show. The initial scene depicts a young Merlin approaching Camelot with a sense of awe, and the voice-over informs the audience that he is destined for greatness. When Camelot appears, the fabled city makes a distinctly fairytale impression as Merlin looks up at the castle walls. Up to this point—with a young protagonist and a Disneyfied version of Camelot—the pilot episode of *Merlin* seems to be targeting a very young audience. Merlin's first impression of Camelot—and therewith also the viewers' first impression of the show—is, however, immediately revised in the subsequent scene. Merlin stumbles upon an assembly where King Uther gives a vitriolic speech about those who practice magic and announces the execution of a witch. Merlin then witnesses a beheading and hears the mother of the deceased call the king the scourge of Camelot 'with [his] hatred and [his] ignorance' (I.1).[36] The beautiful and idyllic image of Camelot presented in the first minutes is undermined by this scene, indicating to viewers that the BBC series intends to address serious topics and adult themes in its adaptation of the Arthurian legend. Series producers Johnny Capps and Julian Murphy claim, however, that they created *Merlin* 'with a youthful audience in mind,' and Capps adds, 'we want it to appeal to mums, dads, brothers, sisters, there is something in it for everyone.'[37] The producers of *Merlin*, like the town of Tintagel, wanted to appeal to a broad audience but they had difficulty finding the correct opposing signs. What then follows is an odd mixture of serious drama and juvenile humor, so that the first episode, like the entire series, oscillates between attempts to appeal to both a young audience new to the legends and at the same time an older viewership already familiar with the Arthurian tradition.

As Rosemary E. Wallbank has pointed out, much of the allure of later medieval versions of Arthurian legends is that 'readers recognized familiar figures, motifs and settings' from earlier narratives.[38] This is true of modern adaptations as well, and almost every episode of the BBC series presents a new

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character—new to the show, but familiar—at King Uther's court. The first episode of *Merlin* introduces the main characters, who include King Uther, Prince Arthur, Lady Morgana, the young wizard Merlin, Morgana's servant Gwen, and the king's physician Gaius. Subsequent episodes add characters known from medieval texts or from modern adaptations of the legend. The second episode, for example, introduces the knight Ewan (Yvain/Iwein); Nimueh appears in episode three; and the fifth episode begins the story of Lancelot. The inclusion of these figures, known from Geoffrey of Monmouth, Chrétien de Troyes, Thomas Malory and others, embeds the BBC series in the Arthurian tradition and delights viewers familiar with the legends. It is, however, the changes and adaptations made to these well-known figures, and the playful toying with audience expectations which enchanted *Merlin*'s viewership.

The inclusion of Geoffrey of Monmouth as a character in *Merlin* is a prime example of the BBC's approach to the Arthurian tradition and one which serves two purposes for the series. The more obvious one is the simple acknowledgement of one of the sources for the medieval Arthurian tradition: Geoffrey of Monmouth and his *History of the Kings of Britain*. The second function of Geoffrey's inclusion in the series is the interaction it creates with the audience. Again we see what Walter Haug calls an 'augenzwinkerndes Spiel mit dem Publikum,'[39] [wink at the audience] or what Balaka Basu claims 'makes the show function like an immense inside joke, which only the educated, *au courant* viewer is privileged enough to understand.'[40] As Basu points out, the writers are playing with and conspiring with their audience,and this game is drawn out over a number of scenes and episodes. Geoffrey is not named when he is first introduced in episode five. He simply sits behind a stack of books and looks disapprovingly at Merlin. After his second appearance, the audience begins to suspect that this librarian is important, and this pattern of introducing a figure or object from Arthurian legend while withholding his, her, or its name will be repeated throughout the series, with Mordred and Excalibur, among others. Finally, halfway through the episode—in a scene where Geoffrey is not even present—Uther Pendragon hands a parchment to a servant and says 'take this seal to Geoffrey of Monmouth, the court genealogist. I want his opinion by morning' (I.5). Now named, but not present, it is not until the following scene that the librarian from earlier is finally connected to the name Geoffrey of Monmouth.

Although the inclusion of Geoffrey appears to be the only direct reference to medieval Arthurian sources, Erin Chandler has demonstrated that the episodes 'Excalibur' and 'The Sins of the Father' draw heavily on the Middle English *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.[41] While the green knight is dressed entirely in black in 'Excalibur' and the beheading game has become Morgause's challenge in 'The Sins of the Father,' Chandler, like Basu, has shown that

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the entertainment value and humor of these episodes is dependent on the audience's knowledge of Arthurian material and plots. *Merlin*'s writers and producers are clearly familiar with the medieval tradition, but opt for a new version of the material, freed from Geoffrey of Monmouth and Thomas Malory, but indebted to them.[42] Other references to the Arthurian world help strengthen the connection between the series and its medieval roots, even if it is clear from the outset that *Merlin* is not drawing on any single source—certainly not Geoffrey of Monmouth, whom the series has recast as a character in Camelot.

Along with the inclusion of Geoffrey of Monmouth as a character, *Merlin* incorporates other elements from the medieval tradition, sometimes easily recognizable and sometimes in slightly altered forms. Season one has episodes entitled 'The Mark of Nimueh,' 'Lancelot,' 'The Gates of Avalon' and 'Excalibur,' to name just a few references to Arthurian lore. The 'initiated viewers' of *Merlin* will even recognize the title of the final episode of the first season 'Le Morte D'Arthur' as a reference to Thomas Malory's monumental Arthurian narrative. And regardless of the source of their knowledge, they might also be familiar with the Questing Beast as a stock element of Arthurian Legend in this episode. 'Le Morte D'Arthur' abounds with the series' typical referential yet playful approach to Arthurian source materials. The episode focuses on an attack on Camelot by a creature that Gaius reveals to be the Questing Beast. Beyond the episode's title, audiences more familiar with medieval narratives will recognize the Questing Beast from Malory's *Le Morte Darthur*,[43] but many modern viewers have cobbled their knowledge of Arthurian Legend together from a number of medieval and modern sources, so that even without having read Malory, the audience may recognize the Questing Beast from, for example, T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*.[44]

The allusion to and connection with the Arthurian tradition are, however, not limited to the episode's title and the presence of the Questing Beast. The reference to Arthur's death also falls into the realm of the playful, as audiences can be relatively certain that the series' hero, Prince Arthur, cannot die. And here again the writers of *Merlin* have created a 'similar but different' take on Arthur's death. The prince is indeed mortally wounded by the incurable venom of the Questing Beast and is fated to die, but the powerful magic of 'the Old Ways' allows Arthur to live at the expense of another's life. In *Merlin*, Arthur's death is not left with the possibility of return from Avalon, but with the reality of his recovery.

'Le Morte D'Arthur,' like so many of the more successful episodes of *Merlin*, includes references which are unlikely to be understood by the series' younger audience. The themes of the episode are also more mature in nature, and there is a complete lack—in this episode at least—of the silliness found frequently in other episodes that seems directed at the series' younger viewers.

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Merlin's loyalty to Arthur—to the point where he is prepared to offer his life for him—is an extreme expression of the friendship and bonds between the series' two protagonists. Gauis' letter to Merlin calling him 'the son I never had' (I.13) also invokes serious ideas of familial relationships. Most striking perhaps is Gwen's speech to an (almost) unconscious Arthur—once again playfully hinting at their future relationship—which focuses on Arthur's role in creating a 'fair and just kingdom' (I.13), superior to the one ruled by his father, King Uther. The allusions to medieval sources and Arthurian tropes, which are recognizable to the older viewers of the series, seem to coincide with the thematic focus shifting away from puerile humor and toward more serious topics. This pivotal episode concludes with Gauis and Arthur restored from the hands of death, Nimueh—a frequent antagonist in the first season—dead, and a dragon enraged. And the final image of the first season is of Morgana awaking from another prophetic dream, setting the groundwork for her eventual alienation from Uther's court because of her connection to magic. 'Le Morte D'Arthur' is one of the series' best episodes, and much of its success is the result of intertextual references to the medieval canon of Arthurian literature.

Along with the departure from tradition created by having Arthur and Merlin be the same age, *Merlin*'s second major point of divergence from audience expectation occurs in the figure of Gwen. In medieval texts from Geoffrey of Monmouth to Thomas Malory, Guenevere is a woman of noble birth. The BBC series introduces Gwen in the first episode and informs its audience that she is Lady Morgana's servant. Producer Johnny Capps states that 'just as in *Smallville,* we wanted to subvert expectations,'[45] and this change in Guenevere's social status is one way the series does this. This device also serves a number of other purposes, bringing questions of class diegetically into the narrative, and raising issues of race extradiegetically with the audience.[46] Most importantly however, making Gwen a servant creates a dynamic tension between audience expectations and onscreen events. Almost as well known as the story of Romeo and Juliet is the story of Arthur and Guenevere, and everyone—even those not all that familiar with the Legends of King Arthur—knows that they marry. Henry Jenkins claims that previews and 'next time on' spoilers create audience expectations[47] and this is exactly the function that audience background knowledge plays regarding Gwen. Viewers suspect that they know how the story ends and are therefore forced to question how the series will bring about the marriage of Prince Arthur with the servant Gwen—and the audience is perhaps even encouraged to wonder if *Merlin* will not depart entirely from tradition. Making Gwen a servant is not a conspiratorial wink at the audience, like the introduction of Geoffrey of Monmouth was, but serves to build tension and create suspense.

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The introduction of Mordred in the middle of season one works similarly to heighten tension and suspense in the series, but only for an audience more familiar with Arthurian legends, and—like the Gwen story-arc—this plotline is drawn out over the course of all five seasons. Mordred's first appearance follows a pattern—mentioned above regarding Geoffrey of Monmouth—where a character is introduced without being named. In the episode 'The Beginning of the End' (I.8), Merlin, Morgana, Gwen, and Prince Arthur aid a young druid boy—played by fifteen-year-old Asa Butterfield—who is being hunted down by King Uther's men. The first hint as to who this boy is comes from the Great Dragon who tells Merlin that he should not help the druid boy and that Merlin 'must let the boy die' (I.8). Arthur and Merlin eventually rescue the boy and return him to his people, and only at this point—the very end of the episode—does Arthur ask him his name, to which he simply replies 'My name is Mordred' (I.8). As the episode ends, the dragon's demand that Merlin let the boy die, and also the episode's title 'The Beginning of the End' become clear, at least to those familiar with the figure of Mordred. In the fifth and final season of *Merlin*, the young druid boy—now played by twenty-four-year-old Alexander Vlahos—returns, and, of course, becomes a central figure in the final conflict between King Arthur and Morgana. Merlin spends most of the final season doubting the apparent good intentions of Mordred, for Merlin—like the audience—knows the role Mordred will play in Arthur's downfall.

Perhaps the most playful, innovative, and successful negotiation of audience expectations is found in *Merlin*'s treatment of the relationship between Arthur, Gwen, and Lancelot. Viewers familiar with the Arthurian legends expect Arthur to marry Gwen, and they also assume—once Lancelot is introduced in the fifth episode of the first season—that Gwen and Lancelot will fall in love.[48] In the series' first episode, Gwen comments on Morgana's prospects of marrying Prince Arthur, saying of Morgana, 'She looks great, doesn't she?...Some people are just born to be queen' (I.1). Gwen then adds, 'Not that I'd want to be her. Who'd want to marry Arthur?' (I.1). Even those less familiar with the Arthurian legends can sit back smugly and smile at how very wrong Gwen is. This playful winking at an in-the-know audience is carried even further in the fifth episode of season one, when Lancelot is finally introduced. This episode, entitled 'Lancelot,' in fact only makes sense to an audience already familiar with the figure Lancelot and with the well-known love triangle. Up to this point in the series Gwen appears to be attracted to Merlin and has shown no interest in Prince Arthur. Similarly, Arthur has taken no notice of Gwen and seems oddly obsessed with Morgana—who viewers later find out is, as they expected, his half-sister. During a court festival Merlin turns to Gwen and says, 'So, come on, just for the sake of argument,

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if you had to, Arthur or Lancelot?' to which Gwen replies, 'But I don't have to and I never will' (I.5).

In a second season episode entitled 'The Once and Future Queen,' (II.2) Arthur and Gwen finally kiss, but in the episode 'Lancelot and Guinevere' (II.5) romantic tension is again created between Arthur's knight and his future bride. Audiences familiar with the Arthurian tradition are forced to wait patiently to see how *Merlin* chooses to address Gwen's and Lancelot's relationship. When Lancelot sacrifices himself in the season four episode 'The Darkest Hour: Part Two,' it seems that *Merlin*'s writers have chosen to abandon this story-arc. However, later in the season, when Morgana hears of Arthur's plans to marry Gwen, she magically resurrects Lancelot in order to sabotage Arthur's and Gwen's relationship. Perhaps with their younger viewers in mind, the series ultimately delivered a slightly sanitized version of the fated love triangle—since Lancelot's and Gwen's betrayal of King Arthur is the result of Morgana's magic—but *Merlin*'s writers kept in-the-know viewers in suspense for four seasons, hinting repeatedly and playfully at results audiences expected, but of which they could never be certain.

Even the recognizable image of Merlin becomes a point of convergence for the BBC's synthesis of expectations and innovations. As mentioned above, the series begins with Merlin and Arthur the same age, a clear departure from the wizard's role as engineer of Arthur's birth and his eventual position as his mentor. The depiction of Merlin's youth is not in and of itself novel, as it has been portrayed in medieval narratives like Geoffrey's *History,* and has continued to captivate audiences in television and cinematic adaptations, including the British series *The Boy Merlin* (1979) and the German *Merlin* (1980) discussed earlier. There is even an established tradition of Merlin appearing as not only a boy, but in a variety of other guises from bard to prophet to stag. Merlin's ability to take on manifold visages is perhaps part of his appeal and has incited Peter Goodrich to borrow Joseph Campbell's phrase and call Merlin 'the wizard with a thousand faces.'[49] The image of Merlin, however, while essentially mutable, has solidified over the centuries into something iconic and instantly recognizable; King Arthur's advisor has become the quintessential wizard, with flowing robes, a staff and a white beard. The opening scene of John Boorman's *Excalibur* (1981) expects its audience to recognize Merlin before he is introduced based solely on his silhouetted figure with 'the shadowy details of a walking staff and billowing robes,' as Barbara D. Miller points out.[50]

The producers of the BBC's *Merlin* cast twenty-two-year-old Colin Morgan in the role of the renowned wizard, but then used make-up to allow him to look like an old man in several episodes. Since King Uther has outlawed all magic, Merlin is unable to use his powers openly while in Camelot. In a number of episodes, Merlin disguises himself as an aged warlock who goes

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by the name Emrys—a name familiar from the medieval tradition—allowing the wizard to use magic without arousing suspicion. The BBC One's website even describes the figure of Emrys as 'Old Merlin' and adds that in the final season 'Morgana is terrified of the aging warlock as she knows him to be her doom.'[51] Emrys, however, is essentially the iconic image of Merlin that audiences readily recognize, with white hair, long beard, and flowing robes. *Merlin* has cast a young actor in the role of Camelot's wizard, but adds another nod to the Arthurian tradition by allowing young Merlin also to embody the audience's preconceived image of the aging wizard.

Perhaps the most protracted audience manipulation, and one which served to keep viewers guessing for five seasons, was the question of when and how Arthur would discover that Merlin was actually a wizard. In most of the medieval Arthurian tradition, Arthur is aware, often from birth, that Merlin is a magician. Fans of the BBC series waited patiently through first one season and then another, knowing that at some point, Merlin would confess his magic to Arthur. From the first season until the final episode, the writers of *Merlin* repeatedly included scenes in which Arthur almost uncovers Merlin's secret, and they even wrote an episode in which Merlin admits that he is a magician. King Uther and Prince Arthur take Merlin's truthful admission as a naïve but brave attempt to accept blame in order to protect a friend, and they dismiss his claim, so that for another four seasons audiences can wonder when the series' central secret will come to light. In a playful-bordering-on-malicious bout of audience manipulation, it is not until the series' final episode that Merlin informs his closest friend of his secret, and the viewers' sigh of relief is diminished by the melancholy of a story now complete.

Along with the many intertextual references to the Arthurian tradition, *Merlin* also incorporates more general elements of medieval literature into the series. And like the Arthurian references, these figures serve to make the audience smile at a name they recognize, but their introduction also creates audience anticipation as they wonder if the figure will conform to an established tradition or appear in an entirely new guise with only a name as a referent. The character Odin, for example, bears the name of a Norse god, but in the series is merely a king with no connection to Viking mythology. When viewers, however, hear the name Odin, they are forced to wonder what association the writers intended with his inclusion. Other character names, like Freyja, are borrowed from the medieval Scandinavian tradition, and also have little more than a name in common with their antecedents. The Disir, on the other hand, play a role in the BBC series that could at least have been inspired by the *Poetic Edda* and other Old Norse texts. And like the Disir, Tristan and Isolde bear some connection to their counterparts in medieval narratives. When Arthur and Merlin first encounter Tristan and Isolde, the audience—at least those familiar with the medieval tradition—will instantly

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recognize their names and associate the two with a tragic love story. While King Mark is never mentioned in *Merlin*, Isolde's tragic death is reminiscent of, but different from, Old French or Middle High German versions of the legend.

And finally, even the language of *Merlin* reflects the attempt of the BBC series to appeal to a bifurcated audience. Much of *Merlin*'s light-hearted humor, presumably intended for its younger viewership, is found in Merlin's stuttering and stammering as he attempts to explain the unexplainable—without mentioning his magic—to Prince Arthur. On the other hand, the series makes considerable effort to make the language of Merlin's, Morgause's, and Morgana's spells at least sound like Old English or medieval Welsh. While it is unlikely that many of the viewers are conversant in these languages, efforts at linguistic authenticity—or at least its approximation—would necessarily be lost on a younger audience.

While *Merlin* does include frequent slapstick humor, such as silly scenes with actual rotten tomatoes and an entire episode featuring a troll-bride, the series' greatest successes are found in those episodes with more mature themes, and these episodes in particular tend to have a stronger connection to the medieval Arthurian tradition. Although the producers repeatedly claim to be addressing a young audience, much of *Merlin*'s appeal is found in the humor, and indeed entire story-lines, which are only fully understood by viewers already familiar with this tradition. Unlike the town of Tintagel with its opposing signs, the BBC series had a more difficult time negotiating a balance between plots intended for initiated and uninitiated viewers. But from the introduction of Geoffrey of Monmouth, Lancelot, and Mordred in the first season to the final revelation at the end of season five, it is clear that—despite the producers' statements to the contrary—*Merlin* was intended for audiences knowledgeable enough of Camelot to enjoy the protracted tension between continuity and innovation that the series created.

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NOTES

1 James Noble, 'Tintagel: The Best of English Twinkie,' in *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, ed. Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), p. 41 [36–43].
2 Noble, 'Tintagel,' in *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, p. 41.
3 Noble, 'Tintagel,' in *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, p. 41.

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4 'The Dragon's Call,' *Merlin*, DVD, directed by Jeremy Webb (2008; Burbank, CA: Shine Limited, 2010). All subsequent references to *Merlin* will be abbreviated to season and episode number.
5 Andrew Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages: The Methods of Cinema and History in Portraying the Medieval World* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), p. 177.
6 Norris J. Lacy, 'The Documentary Arthur: Reflections of a Talking Head,' in *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, ed. Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), p. 78 [77–86].
7 Elliott, *Remaking the Middle Ages*, p. 180.
8 Noble, 'Tintagel,' in *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, p. 41.
9 See, for example, James Poag and Claire Baldwin's introduction to *The Construction of Textual Authority in German Literature of the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. James F. Poag and Claire Baldwin (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), pp. 1–8.
10 Poag, *The Construction of Textual Authority*, p. 3. See also Peter Kern, *Die Artusromane des Pleiers: Untersuchungen über den Zusammenhang von Dichtung und literarischer Situation* (Berlin: Schmidt, 1981), pp. 12–13.
11 Walter Haug, 'Wege der Befreiung von Autorität,' in *The Construction of Textual Authority in German Literature of the Medieval and Early Modern Periods*, ed. James F. Poag and Claire Baldwin (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), p. 37 [31–48].
12 Poag, *The Construction of Textual Authority*, p. 4.
13 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, ed. Jacob Hammer (Cambridge, MA: The Medieval Academy of America, 1951), p. 22; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966), p. 51.
14 Richard Loomis, 'Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth,' in *The Romance of Arthur*, ed. James Wilhelm (New York: Garland, 1994), p. 59 [59–63].
15 Edwin Pace, 'Geoffrey's "Very Old Book" and Penda of Mercia,' *Arthuriana* 22.2 (2012): 53 [53–74].
16 Chrétien de Troyes, *Arthurian Romances* (New York: Everyman, 1968), p. 1.
17 Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*, ed. Gottfried Weber (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963), p. 698.
18 This is 'the only indisputable example of an invented source in Middle High German.' Carl Lofmark, *The Authority of Source in Middle High German Narrative Poetry* (Leeds: The Institute of Germanic Studies, 1981), p. 63.
19 The series is based on an episode of the successful children's series *Shadows*, which was broadcast in the UK from 1975–1978. The *Shadows* episode 'The Boy Merlin' was aired on October 11, 1978, and the spinoff series *The Boy Merlin*'s 'first' episode aired on April 23, 1979. The DVD release includes the *Shadows* episode as the pilot, making what is technically the first episode the second. My citations follow numbering and ordering on the DVD release. 'Red Dragon, White Dragon,' *The Boy Merlin*, DVD, directed by Joe Boyer (1979, rerelease 2011, London, Thames

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Television). All subsequent references will be abbreviated to season and episode number.

20 Although the series' six/seven episodes aired long before Bert Olton's *Arthurian Legend on Film and Television* (2000), they are not included in Olton's work. Bert Olton, *Arthurian Legend on Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000).

21 Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Historia Regum Britanniae*, p. 124; Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*, p. 171.

22 Like *The Boy Merlin*, the German series' thirteen episodes aired long before Bert Olton's *Arthurian Legend on Film and Television* (2000), but *Merlin* is not included in Olton's work. Bert Olton, *Arthurian Legend on Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2000).

23 'Rivalen,' *Merlin*, DVD, directed by Armin Dahlen (1980, rerelease 2005, Dusseldorf, Warner Music Group Germany). All subsequent references will be abbreviated to season and episode number; translations are my own.

24 Haug, 'Wege der Befreiung,' in *The Construction of Textual Authority*, p. 37. My translation.

25 A number of the essays in *Sherlock Holmes for the 21st Century: Essays on New Adaptations* examine the connections between the BBC series and Doyle's stories. *Sherlock Holmes for the 21st Century: Essays on New Adaptations*, ed. Lynnette Porter (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012).

26 Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes* (New York: Bantam Doubleday, 1986), p. 161 and p. 175.

27 'A Study in Pink,' *Sherlock*, DVD, directed by Paul McGuigan (2010, London, British Broadcast Company). All subsequent references will be abbreviated to season and episode number.

28 Kern, *Die Artusromane des Pleiers*, pp. 12–13.

29 Carlen Lavigne, 'The Noble Bachelor and the Crooked Man: Subtext and Sexuality in the BBC's *Sherlock*,' in *Sherlock Holmes for the 21st Century: Essays on New Adaptations*, ed. Lynnette Porter (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), p. 16 [13–23].

30 Lavigne, 'The Noble Bachelor,' p. 16.

31 Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 5.

32 Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 5.

33 Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 9.

34 Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 187.

35 Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, p. 197.

36 For further discussion of Uther's intolerance see David Tollerton's essay in this issue.

37 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/09_september/01/merlin2.shtml>. Last accessed March 21, 2013.

38 Rosemary E. Wallbank, 'Three Post-Classical Authors: Heinrich von dem Türlin, Der Stricker, Der Pleier,' in *The Arthur of the Germans*, eds. W.H. Jackson and S.A. Ranawake (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), p. 81 [81–97].

39 Haug, 'Wege der Befreiung,' in *The Construction of Textual Authority*, p. 37.

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40 Balaka Basu, '"It's All Real, I Knew It": Metafiction, Belief and the Audience in SF/F Television,' Conference Presentation, Bristol, UK, 2010, p. 11.
41 See Erin Chandler's essay in this issue.
42 Producer Julian Murphy said, 'We didn't want to make a 15th-century version of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table,' indicating the producers' intentional break with—and therefore also their familiarity with—the medieval tradition. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/09_september/01/merlin2.shtml>. Last accessed March 21, 2013.
43 Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (New York: Modern Library, 1999), pp. 35–38.
44 T.H. White, *The Once and Future King* (New York: Ace Books, reprint 2011), p. 161 and p. 329.
45 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2008/09_september/01/merlin2.shtml>. Last accessed March 21, 2013.
46 For a discussion of the casting of Angel Coulby for the role of Gwen, see Jennifer Edwards' and David Tollerton's essays in this issue.
47 Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 58.
48 *Merlin* does sanitize a number of elements known from the medieval tradition, removing entirely, for example, Uther's deception of Igraine. There have been numerous attempts to sanitize or lessen Guenevere and Lancelot's adultery, including an episode of *Fantasy Island* in which Arthur is impulsive and jealous, and simply imagines an affair between the two. See Bert Olton, 'Was That in the Vulgate? Arthurian Legend in TV Film and Series Episodes,' in *King Arthur in Popular Culture*, ed. Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2002), p. 91 [87–100].
49 Peter Goodrich, *The Romance of Merlin* (New York: Garland, 1990), p. xiii.
50 Barbara D. Miller, '"Cinemagicians": Movie Merlins of the 1980s and 1990s' in *King Arthur on Film: New Essays on Arthurian Cinema*, ed. Kevin J. Harty (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1999), p. 142 [141–166].
51 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/boomjlxv/heroes/emrys>. Last accessed March 20, 2013.

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